

Life: Enhancing your Frame of Reference

Tim Bunce - @timbunce - YAPC::NA 2015



“Real listening is a willingness to be changed

("Real listening is a willingness to be changed." – Alan Alda)

Are you open to seeing the world from a different perspective?

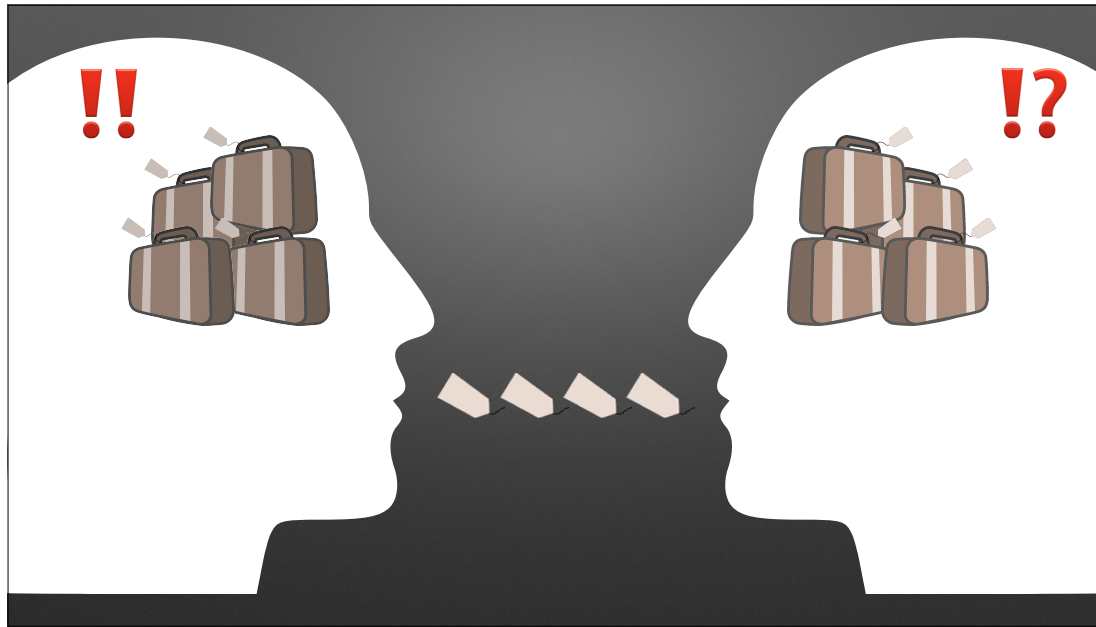
Even if that means walking out of here believing fewer things than you do now?

~~The Truth~~

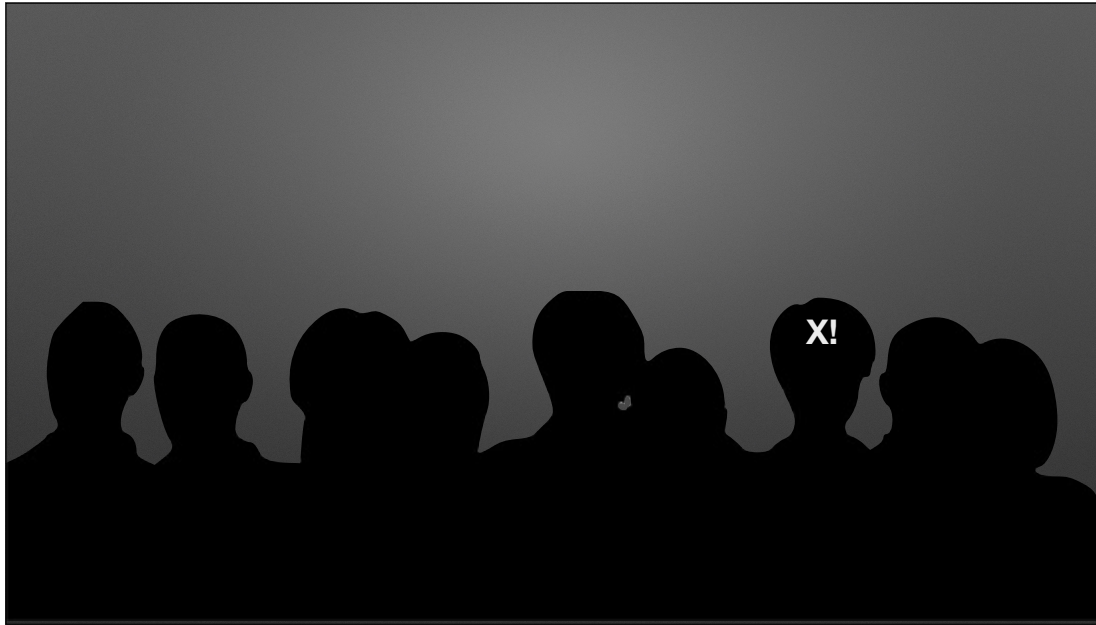
- This talk isn't The Truth. It's my attempt to explain my perspective to myself in a way that might be useful to others.
- Whenever I say "you" in this talk I'm referring to me.
- Naturally they'll be a lot of omissions and simplifications
- Take what appeals to you and leave the rest.
- I'll be uploading the notes

Communicating Concepts

- Say I have some information, an idea, that I want to tell you about.
I translate the idea into words, I say the words, you hear them and translate them back into concepts.
We do it all the time. We're doing it now. It works.
- Except, maybe not as well as we like to think. Each step has limitations

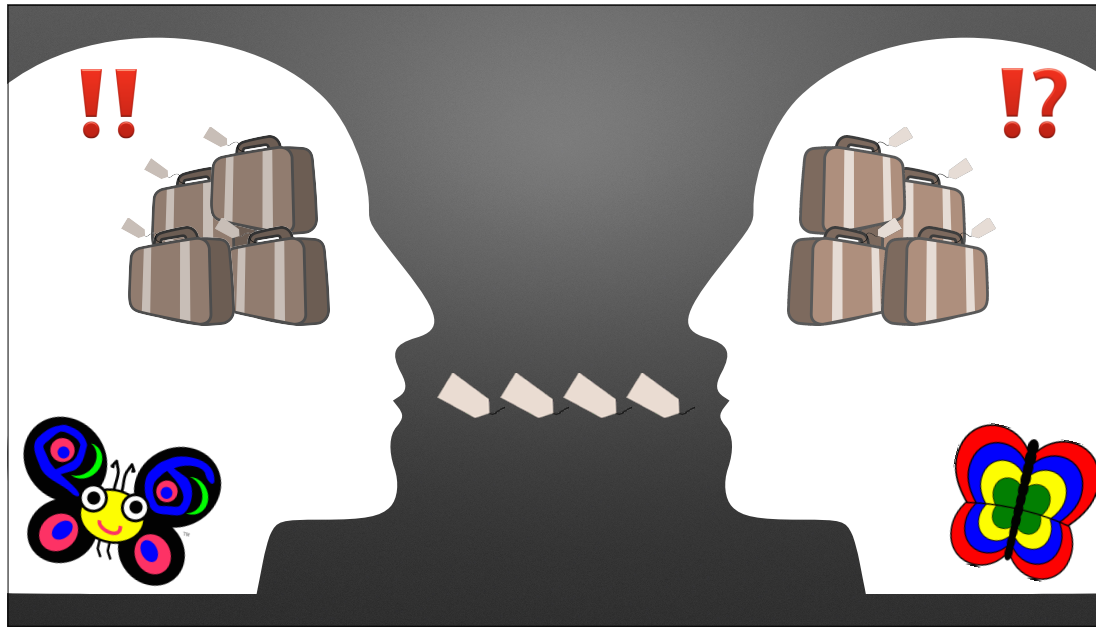


- I may struggle to pick words and form sentences that convey the idea accurately. Even if I do that well, a lot of detail and nuance is lost
- * I'm picking words and forming sentences based on my interpretation of the meaning of those words.
- The words I pick are based on my perspective, my world-view, my biases, my baggage. My frame of reference
- But that's not clear to you, the listener. You don't know my frame.
- *** You hear the words I've spoken and unpack them into concepts based on your interpretation of the words.
Your perspective, your world-view, your biases, your baggage. Your frame of reference
- *** Your understanding of the information I'm trying to share is inevitably influenced by your beliefs. It's built-in to the very process of communication.
- It's like a very lossy image compression algorithm but you the listener doesn't notice because of the detail that you add into the image as you reconstruct it.
- We both believe the information has been communicated but we can't be sure. I might ask you if you've understood: you'll say yes because you believe you have.
- This is happening all the time. Even as you listen to me now.
- So be always doubtful of your understanding. Hold it lightly. Be aware that it's always reflecting your own beliefs, your own frame of reference.
- .



Here's an exercise for you:

- While you're listening to the rest of this talk you're bound to have thoughts like "Oh, he's talking about X" where X is some label.
 - Try to stay aware of your thoughts and notice when that happens. And to notice two things in particular.
 - Firstly, what the thought feels like as it arrives. Like solving a little puzzle. Winning a prize. A sense of gaining something.
 - And secondly, notice the baggage that comes with that label "X" whatever it is.
- Notice any thoughts or feelings arriving into your awareness just after the "Oh, he's talking about X" thought.



- Now let's look at what happens when I try to share something more subtle, like a sensory experience.
- * The look of an exotic butterfly. The feel of a fabric. The taste of a food. A sound of some music.

- In order to communicate that experience first I have to conceptualise it.
I will struggle to form accurate concepts of the experience.
No matter how well I do that lot of detail and nuance is lost.
- Then there are all the limitations communicating the concepts that I outlined earlier, losing even more detail and nuance

- You'll form your conceptual version based on your own understanding of the words you hear.
- Those concepts may evoke experiences in you, but what you experience isn't what I experienced. It's a patchwork of your own *previous* experiences
- * And possibly not even appropriate ones depending on how you've interpreted the words I've used.
- Technically this is known as the Explanatory Gap.
- Similes and metaphors, art and poetry, help us paper over the gap, but often we don't even notice the gap is there.
- .



- Imagine you're eating some of your favourite chocolate. Try to recall the actual experience.
- How would you express that experience to someone who has *never eaten chocolate*? Please, try it now in your mind. [pause]
- You might be choosing some words and phrases to describe the colour, the smell, the bite, texture, melting, flavours etc.
- Can you see how each of those words and phrases is a label? A symbol?
- A vast simplification that falls far short of the actual experience.
- And yet it's that very simplification, that abstraction, which enables effective thinking and communication. Or at least appears to.
- So, when someone tries to share their experience with you, any experience, including in this talk, always be doubtful of your understanding. Hold it lightly. Be aware that it's a reflection your own previous experiences.

“All knowledge exists within a frame of reference

- All knowledge, all beliefs, exist within a Frame of Reference.
- "Knowledge seems absolutely true only to the extent that we're incapable of stepping outside of the frame of reference in which it's based."
- You'd probably agree that I'm pretty much stationary now. It's obvious. Self-evident.
- So you'd disagree with me if I said I was moving at over 300 miles per second. Clearly I'm wrong, and possibly crazy!

- I am stationary. You are stationary. That's true.

Yet it's also true that we're moving at over 700 miles per hour as the Earth spins.

It's also true that we're moving at 67,000 miles per hour as we orbit the Sun.

And at 450,000 miles per hour as we orbit the Milky Way.

And at 1.3 million miles per hour relative to the Cosmic Background Radiation.

Each of those speeds is absolutely True. For a certain viewpoint, perspective, Frame of Reference.

- When you're open to doubting your current perspective, when you hold it lightly, it's easier to see others

.

Finding the Frame

What are you taking for granted?

- What views do you hold about yourself, others, and the world around you, that are so obvious to you, so self-evident, that you don't even notice them?
- It's hard to tell isn't it?
- I call them our Frame of Reference
- They form the frame through which we interpret the world. If you're not aware of them, then you're not aware of how they influence your experience and understanding of your life.
- You've probably had the experience of discussing something with someone, perhaps arguing about it, only to discover that there's been a misunderstanding about the meaning of the words used, or the circumstances surrounding the issue. You've had different frames of reference.
- How often have you had an argument about something, where you've had different frames of reference, without realising it?
- Ultimately, everybody's frame of reference is different. Everybody's experience is different.
- This is beautifully summed up by the phrase "No two people ever read the same book".
- (Yet it's amazing how often we argue over whether a book is "good" or "bad", as if some universal frame of reference existed! It is what it is. Our *judgement* of it, is our own.)

Perspective

- My perspective shifted a few years ago. The funny thing about a change in perspective is that nothing changes. And yet, the experience of everything changes.
- This whole talk comes out of my fascination with idea of how I'd explain the shift to my former self, and the discovery of how incredibly difficult that would be. (Especially in 20 minutes!)



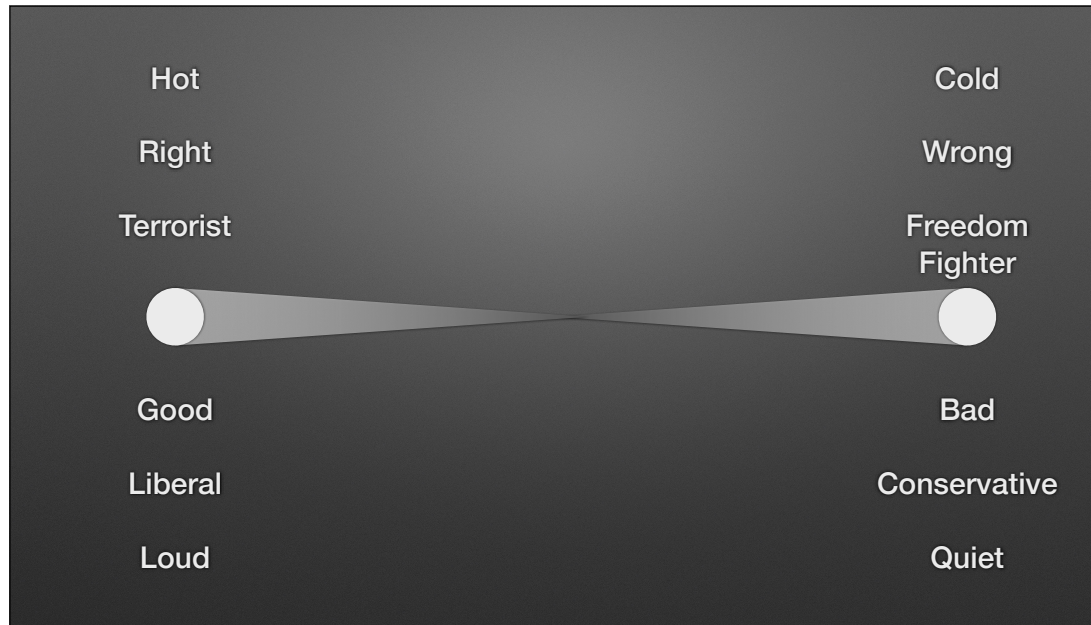
- Our senses only pick up a tiny tiny fraction of the reality that surrounds us. Reducing it to patterns of low-bandwidth signals which are further degraded as they travel along the nerves. Even with this reduction our brain is immersed in a flood of sensory input.
- In some way that's not understood these simple signals entering the brain are processed, filtered and reconstructed into the apparent technicolor world of our day-to-day experiences. Or Quaila. The mystery surrounding this process is known as The Hard Problem of consciousness.
- Our awareness is immersed *not* in the outer reality but in our reconstructed experience. Color, for example, is an illusion.
- We reason about and act upon the *reconstructed* experience.
- For most animals that boils down to deciding: Friend or Foe? Meal or Mate?
- As humans we operate at a higher level (hopefully).



- I want to touch upon two particular aspects of experience: Habituation and Labelling
- Habituation is a fancy word for getting used to what's usual, what's "Normal".
- Tuning out the normal lets the mind focus its limited attention on what's Unusual, Abnormal. On the differences.
- This is a simple yet powerful mechanism wired deep into all organisms. You're probably familiar with the example of boiling a frog slowly.
- We can get used to almost anything. We already have. Personally, socially, culturally, we are deeply habituated to what's usual in *our* experience.
- Another way to say it is that we're conditioned. By our parents, our habits and peers, our society and culture.
- The catch here is that, almost by definition, it's really hard to be aware of the conditioning. It's become part of our Frame of Reference.



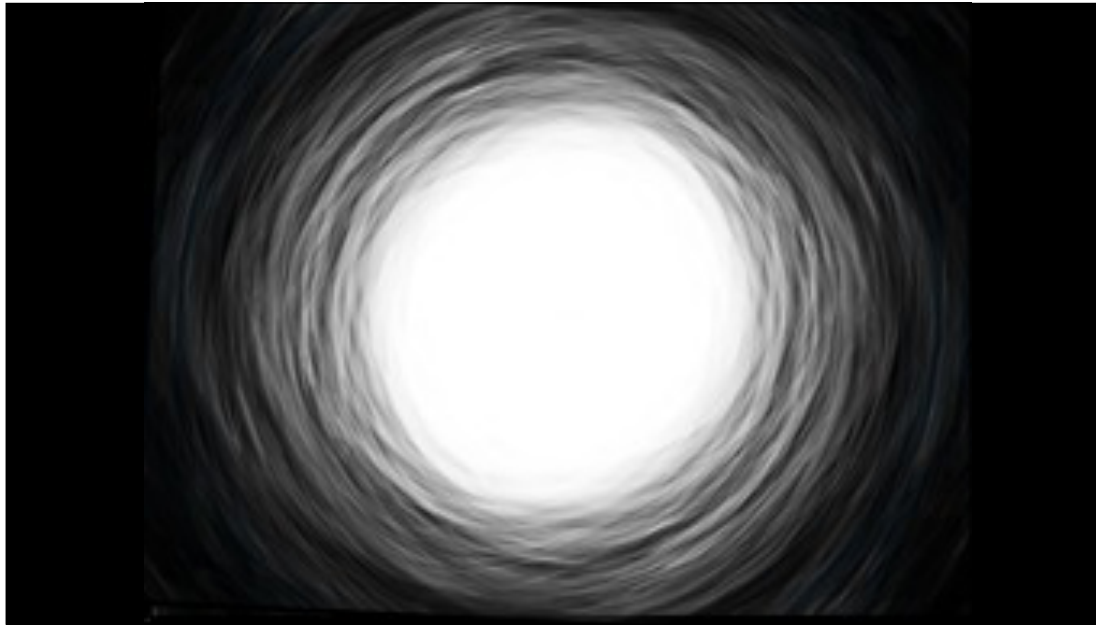
- Habituation stems the flood of sensory input, filtering it down just "things we notice".
- The next step is to reduce the noticed experiences to labels. Friend, Foe, Meal, Mate, Partner, Chair, House, Tree.
- These are concepts, symbols which we've linked to words in our language.
- With them we can think about trees without having to have a specific tree here.
- Labels are an essential raw material for higher-level thinking, learning and communication.
- Yet they're also abstractions, isolating us from the actual experience. The actual tree.
- Because our attention can move so easily between the concept of "tree" and a specific experience of a tree we rarely notice the emptiness of the abstractions and symbols that we're thinking with.



- In order to label something we have to categorise it, to decide what label to apply. We have to judge it. To form an opinion.
- Our thinking and speaking are streams of categorisation, polarization, judgement, labelling.
- It's necessary and normal so of course... we're rarely aware of it.

*** Hot/cold, right/wrong, terrorist/freedom-fighter, good/bad, liberal/conservative, loud/quiet

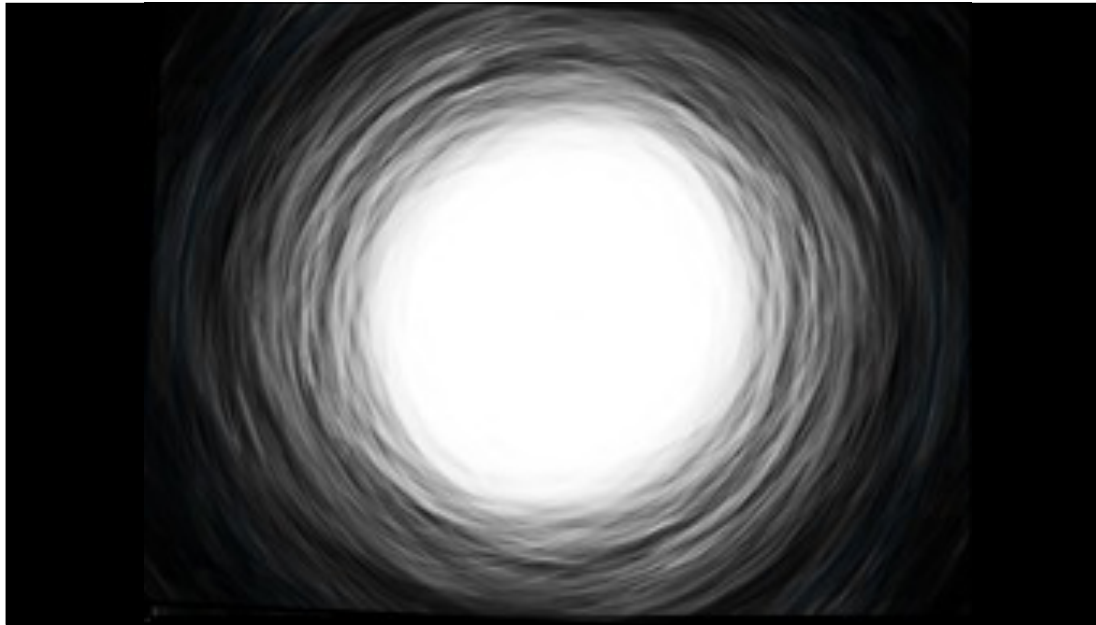
- Between pairs is a range. The middle ground is nuanced and much harder to label.
- Our mind wants to assign labels for thinking and communication so we naturally tend toward using the clear labels at the extremes.
- Once again detail and nuance is lost



- To have an experience, any experience, we have to be consciously aware of it.
- But what is consciousness? What is awareness?

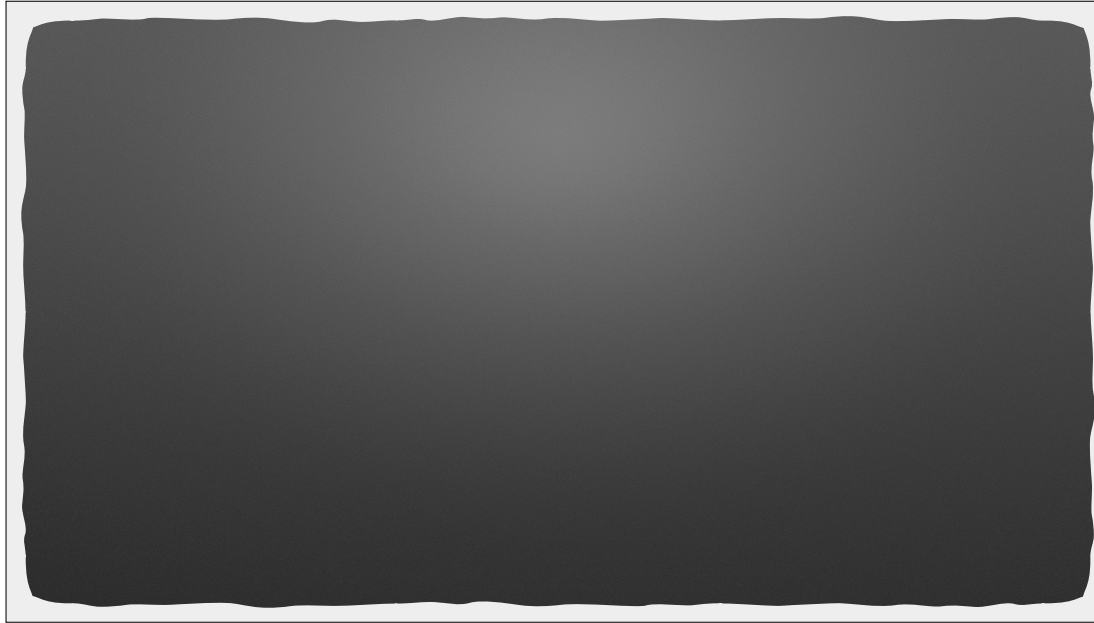
No one knows, so let's try a simpler question...

- What is the experience of awareness? Can we be aware of being aware?
- I tend to think of awareness as being like a very wide floodlight softly illuminating everything you're aware of. Not just sights, but sounds, thoughts, feelings. Everything that's "in your awareness".
- Attention is a word we use to refer to awareness when it's more concentrated. Like a bright narrow beam that's focussed on one thing at a time and darts around easily.
- I'm sure you've noticed that the more intensely you pay attention to something the less aware you become of everything else.



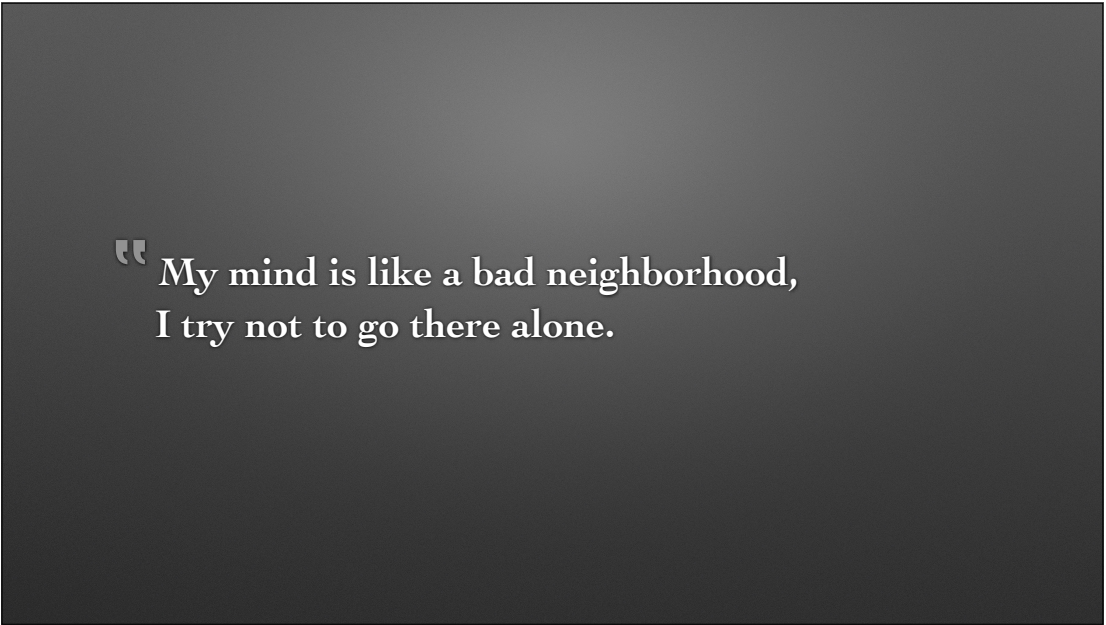
Let's do a simple exercise in experiencing awareness. In paying attention.

- Place your attention on the feelings coming from your left foot. The feel of your shoe, warmth, some tingling maybe. Without moving or thinking about your foot, simply be with it, with a quiet mind. Try it now. [pause]
- What you're paying attention *to* is your left foot. What you're paying attention *with* is something else.
- We'll do it again, but this time, after a few seconds, I'll say something to prompt some thinking.
I want you to notice what happens to your attention.
- So, pay attention to your foot again, with a quiet mind. [longer pause]
- Seven times Twelve.
- Did you notice your attention move away from your foot when you started thinking?
The focus of your awareness moved from your foot into your mind.
- Your full attention can't be on a thought and something else at the same time.
You need to be aware of the thought, just as you were aware of your foot.
- So awareness is different to thinking. *Awareness is primary*. Thinking, feeling, seeing and every other kind of experience, are secondary. They are only known *within* your conscious awareness.



So what? Why am I talking about this conscious aware space stuff?

- Becoming more aware of our own awareness gives us a different perspective on the content and experience of our life.
- It's easier to see our habitual assumptions and biases, so we can choose to question them
- It's easier to see the repetitive patterns in our thoughts, so we can pay less attention to them
- It's easier to find space around powerful feelings and emotions, so they're less likely to overwhelm us
- It's easier to have choice, in how we respond to life's events, triggers, and challenges

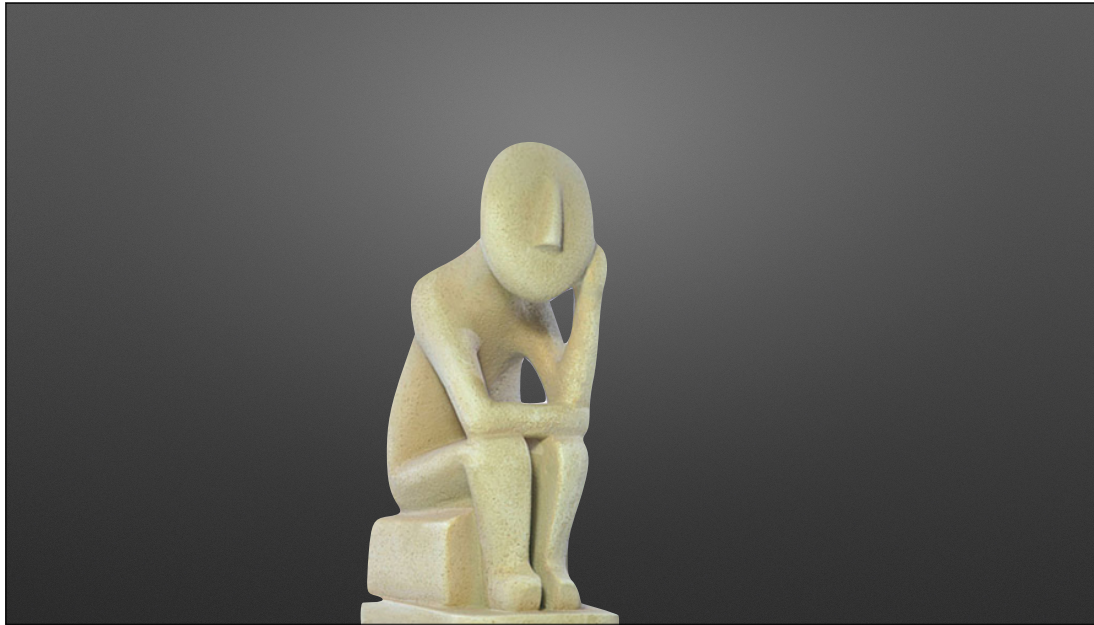


“My mind is like a bad neighborhood,
I try not to go there alone.

There's a catch though! And it's a *big* one.

- As you bring more awareness to your thinking, it's very tempting to spend time thinking about your thinking. Especially when you start notice how unhelpful most of it is!
- Your thinking mind will happily analyse and judge your thoughts for you. After all, analysing and judging is what it does best!
- It'll happily provide a running commentary on the running commentary that's already in your head!
- And it would be foolish to assume that your thinking mind would be impartial about its own thoughts.
- No. If you want to understand your mind, you need to observe it.
- Just observing your thoughts, *without* judgement, starts to bring about change. A neutral compassionate perspective acts like a solvent.
- It seems that within the awareness a kind of intelligence is at work.
- Presumably the same kind that manages your blood chemistry, and drives your car while you're thinking about something else.

(Quote by Annie Lamott)



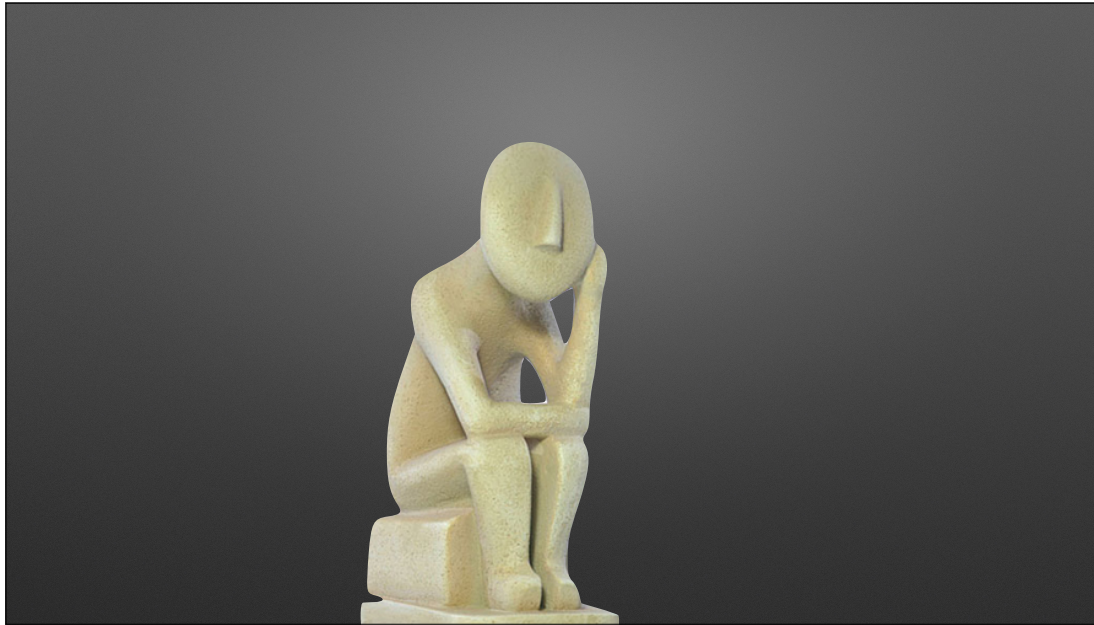
Thinking

- I'd like to highlight one pattern of thinking you might already have noticed.
- That of "wanting things to be different to how they are".
- This is a *structural pattern of thinking*, that's independent of the actual content of your life. You can *always* find something you want to be different.

Imagine you're having an ordinary day, not particularly good or bad, just typical. Your default state. Then a thought enters your mind: "I wish I was happier". It could be any similar "I wish something was different" thought.

- What's the effect of that thought on your happiness? ... You get less happy! Isn't that interesting?
- But note that it's not the thought itself that has that effect. No, the effect of becoming less happy comes from *believing* the thought.
- From grabbing the fleeting thought and turning it into an opinion that you hold on to. A belief that becomes part of your frame of reference, through which you're continually processing your experiences.
- And of course, with that opinion, with that belief, you'll easily find endless confirmation that, yes, you wish you were happier!
- The thoughts reinforce the belief in a cycle that's hard to break out of.

.



It helps to try to tease apart the situation, from the thoughts you're having about it.

- In this example there is no situation, the unhappiness is caused entirely by believing the thought.
- Usually though there will be some underlying situation that prompts the thought, that becomes an opinion, that alters your frame of reference, that biases you towards confirmation of the opinion, prompting more thoughts. And cycle continues.
- Usually the web of thoughts that we weave into a story around the situation are the source of much more unhappiness than the situation itself.

Now imagine you've been believing a "wish things were different" thought like that for some time. Then at some point, you cease believing it. What's the effect on your happiness?

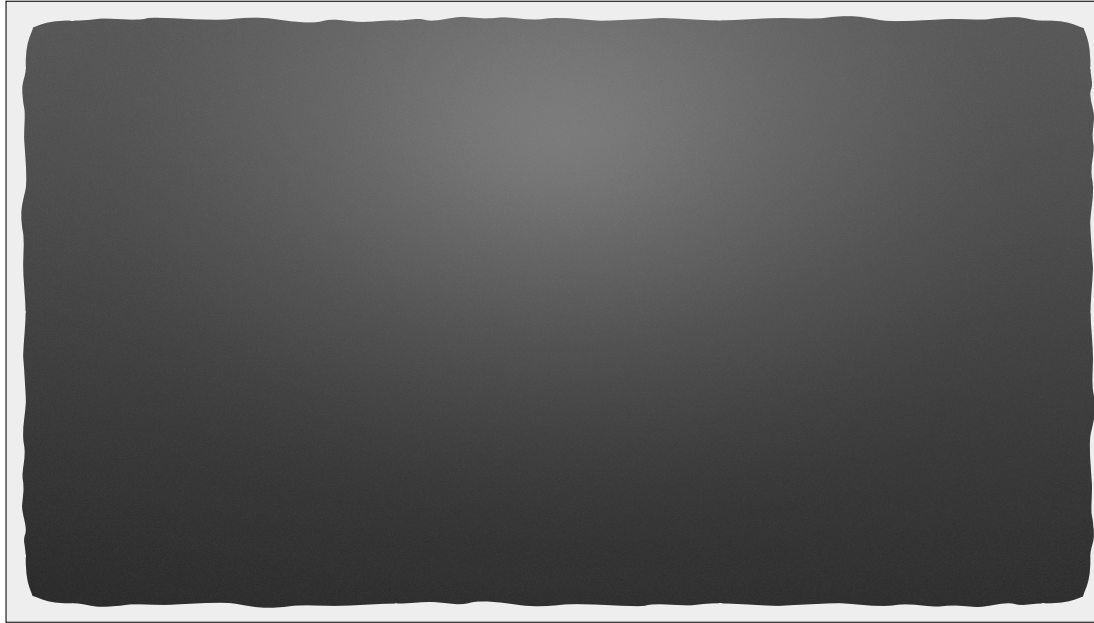
- You get happier! ... Isn't that interesting?

But do you see the catch?

- It's a lot easier to believe a thought than it is to stop believing in one!
- We live in and maintain a bubble of rightness. How many of your opinions do you think are wrong? Probably none.
- And have you noticed that most of your thoughts arrive with a built-in sense of truth and importance?

These processes are so deep, so habitual, that we rarely notice them. It's hard to find a clear vantage point to see them at work within us.

- And that's where the awareness comes in. It gives you a place to observe the mind, stepping out the cycle of thinking and judging.



I'm not asking you to believe any of this.

- I'm inviting you to get curious about *your* experience of your own life.
- To practice bringing a non-judgemental awareness to your own inner processes.
- To begin see your own Frame of Reference and how it's continuously influencing your experience
- To look deeply into the *beliefs* you hold, and to question those beliefs and your need for them.
- Then you can choose to loosen your grip on *them*, so they can loosen their grip on *you*.

The end.